

***Beauty Up: Exploring Contemporary Japanese Body Aesthetics.* Laura Miller. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006. 256 pp.<sup>1</sup>**

Reviewed by Richard Chalfen

In her latest book, Laura Miller has combined her skills as a linguistic anthropologist and scholar of Japanese society and culture to produce a compelling and provocative treatise on Japanese beauty culture as it developed in the mid-1990s and early 2000s. In doing so she contributes to a reinvigorated understanding of visual culture, one that goes well beyond the anthropology or sociology of fashion and notions of the body-as-text. She explores such problematic domains as the politics of appearance, the roles played by the hegemonic European beauty ideology, media acculturation and media socialization—the ways and means that “beauty treatments and ideas actively journey around the world as part of a global body transformation enterprise” (p. 66), among others. Miller presents many details of past and contemporary preferences for beauty in Japan. Readers will find detailed discussion of eye-lid modification, teeth-blackening, white skin, hairline aesthetics (heads, eye brows, pubic zones/v-lines), nipple bleaching, Lolita complexes, Karaoke diets, among many others. I mention these early to focus instead on the real value of the book, which lies in how Miller theorizes connections to broader conceptual frameworks, questioning, for instance, the commonly held belief that “some concepts of female attractiveness are universal and are therefore intimately grounded in biology and evolution” (p. 73).

The Introduction and eight chapters focus on changing beauty ideologies, the ample existence of aesthetic salons (not the same as spas or beauty parlors), female and male preferred appearances, beauty etiquette and manners, the diet industry and surrounding language and beauty imaging practices. Each chapter is very well organized and united with themes that question origins and contemporary interpretations of beauty practices and looks. This nicely illustrated book concludes with an impressively useful 25-page bibliography.

Miller provides her readers with a good view of what participant observation looks like in contemporary modern urban circumstances. Her credibility is enhanced with in-person, face-to-face interactions with members of the Japanese beauty culture. For instance she personally undergoes treatments at several aesthetic salons, gaining first hand accounts of how body improvement is marketed as scientific process, including such props as special uniforms, technological equipment, clinical and laboratory settings, all of which promote an atmosphere of control, prediction, and success via science. She visits the Takano Yuri Beauty Clinic and the Socie Salon for the Basic Bust Up course to see the medicalization of breast fashion; she also visits several male *esute* salons with a male friend to understand better male counterparts; and she works and lives in Osaka, affiliating with Japanese friends, staying at each other’s apartments, observing and learning beauty secrets that ordinary people use on a daily basis.

Miller offers young scholars a superb example of blending ethnographic practice and cultural studies—in terms of both model of argumentation and logic. She exploits the “multidimensional

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nature of cultural studies” by integrating personal observations, interviews, historical details, and “textual/linguistic interpretations of media images and products as legitimate support” for her ideas (p. 15). While it was not Miller’s primary objective to expose fraudulent practices and bogus products, she is not afraid to speak out and reference ineffectuality via another sense of scientific validation.

The author asks us to consider the pushes and pulls of beauty standards, changing beauty values and fashions as she explores the complexity of the beauty economy and beauty nationalism. For example, when discussing dieting, Miller links “slimming to broader social, political, and economic factors...Dieting is an arena where social and individual needs converge. It is multi-determined, emanating from a combination of beauty politics, cultural proscriptions, and individual desire” (p. 173). She examines the central variables that ground such standards, origins for beauty norms and, in turn, questions how all of this fits into past and present consumer capitalism as she states: “The body has become a focus for capitalist expansion, and contemporary Japanese are urged to seek new bodies around which to frame their personalities” (p. 18). In another case, when discussing symbolic features of breast enhancement/augmentation (producing a “prolonged front”), she explores links between “breast fashions, a trend toward the surface expression of identity, and the spread of global Euroamerican beauty ideology” (p. 73).

I especially appreciated the interplay of the individual and the social. Attention to personal beautification can be read as a space where features of intense self-improvement (e.g. perseverance, struggle, self-discipline, sacrifice, and hard work), all come into play. But this same attention could be read as contributing to a less than desired narcissistic self-centeredness. Instead Miller notes how the beauty industry stresses appearance in such social domains as manners and etiquette, thus maintaining norms for preferred interaction.

One of the most important and impressive points in *Beauty Up* is Miller’s interpretation of what constitutes beauty in Japan. She repeatedly warns us against ethnocentric assessments of exotic practices as she cautions us to avoid interpretations based on “the slavish emulation of the west” (p. 123). Miller frequently stresses an anti-Western narcissism and adds: “I do not deny that the politics of appearance in Japan is inextricably bound up in Euroamerican dominance. New beauty conventions in Japan also involve aspects of intimacy, appropriation, and reworking. Japanese exist in a Western-dominated world order, but we are missing something if the only interpretation we imagine is “wretched imitation” (p. 122). Miller recognizes a recontextualization process based on the importance of recognizing local uses, practices, and meanings in the face of global homogenizing forces. When speaking of media socialization, Miller reminds us that media influence may come less from Hollywood and more from Japanese sources including film, television, magazine advertisements, and *manga*.

In short, questions of outside influence and change regularly appear. Avoiding any sense of condescension or pandering, Miller emphasizes how “hybrid beauty reflects domestically creolized innovation” (p. 20). Through processes of proactive selection and adaptation, ordinary people demonstrate a capability for making choices, asserting their own degrees of independence, individuality, and, in some cases, sexual autonomy. Again, beauty trends in Japan express a separately developed aesthetic and are not “failed versions” of Euroamerican styles” (p. 32).

Regardless of the speed with which the beauty industry may be changing, Miller provides her readers with a solid set of principles for understanding inevitable changes and for avoiding ethnocentric judgments. Miller suggests many topics for additional study—of the fascinating interplay of appearance, identity, and cultural values—all of which contribute to a healthy revision of what deserves to be studied. Miller shows us how studies of beauty find a place alongside more recognized topics in Japanese visual culture such as woodblock prints, classic feature films, and manga. She has written an academic beauty that deserves much attention.

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